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ABSTRACT

The previous history of unsystematic practice of educational evaluation has created for the present evaluator a set of problems resulting from a tradition of fear, mistrust, suspicion and disbelief among the educational community. Absences of evidence of critical influence have resulted in the underfunding of evaluation. Common problems faced by evaluators can be attributed to the current state of the art and to the present status of education. Social action programs have three major characteristics: (1) The goals or intentions of the programs seek to effect changes in society as a whole; (2) The programs are outgrowths of social theory and due to the changing nature of social theory often fail to be accompanied by operational prototypes; and (3) The programs are action-oriented and fail to provide time for indecision. Problems to be dealt with by evaluators of social action programs arise from the uniqueness of the program goals or from the developmental nature of the programs. Problems faced include: (1) the presence of value conflicts and the absence of procedures for negotiation, (2) inability of decision maker to identify total information needs, (3) unrealistic schedules or goals, (4) length of time required for completion of programs, (5) measurement of uncharted relationships, and (6) inability to analyze complex interactions. (CK)

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PROBLEMS FACING THE EVALUATOR OF SOCIAL ACTION PROGRAMS

by

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A FOCUS ON CURRENT GAPS

The previous history of unsystematic practice of educational evaluation has created for the present evaluator a set of problems resulting from a tradition of fear, mistrust, suspicion and disbelief among the educational community. Educational management often fails to be as systematic and scientific as it is hypothesized to be; descriptions of program objectives and activities often fail to serve as unique identifiers which adequately communicate to non-program personnel program similarities and differences. The present status of measurement in education is lacking the skills to deal adequately with several variables of major concern, such as consistencies of philosophy and practice. Current design and analysis models fail to accommodate the complexity of the educational environment and fail to produce information upon critical relationships. Methods of reporting results and of using data lack the simplicity and clarity often demanded in their application. Absences of evidence of critical influence have resulted in the underfunding of evaluation. Efforts to defend and to interest educators in further evaluation commitments have often resulted in educational administrators' expecting too much, too soon, of evaluation.

Hence, there exists an array of common problems faced by evaluators which can be attributed to the current state of the art and to the present status of education. These problems are generally faced by all evaluators, regardless of the size, scope or nature of the enterprise being evaluated. There exists, however, a group of problems not usually mentioned as common problems that are more attributable to specific evaluation tasks. These problems usually differ according to the types of programs being evaluated. This paper will be concerned with dealing with those problems that are associated with social action programs.

Social action programs for the most part can be thought of as having three

major characteristics: (1) the goals or intentions of the programs seek to effect changes in society as a whole; (2) the programs are outgrowths of social theory and due to the changing nature of social theory often fail to be accompanied by operational prototypes; and (3) the programs are action-oriented and fail to provide time for indecision. Many of the social action programs are based upon reform and tend to be directed toward areas where value controversies exist.

Generally, the special problems to be dealt with by evaluators of social action programs arise from the uniqueness of the goals of the social action programs or from the general unchartedness or developmental nature of the programs in question. The problems that will be discussed in this paper generally do not have solutions. This lack of solution, however, does not prevent them from being significant, critical barriers in the design of evaluation and worthy of discussion.

The first problem to be faced by the evaluator of social action programs deals with the presence of value conflicts and the absence of procedures through which these value conflicts can be negotiated. Social action programs usually maintain reform as a major focus. In cases of social reform, value conflicts exist as a given. Reformers usually become involved in activities dealing with reform through dedication. Social action programs as a whole tend to attract dedicated people; yet, as in so many other programs, those attracted fail to have the same set of goals.

A first component of this problem is that the nature of the value conflict encountered in social action programs is of such an intensity that interpersonal relationships among leaders and administrators often break down, whereas in other education programs conflicts regarding values or outcomes are usually superseded by overriding common goals or objectives.

A second component of the problem involved with the presence of value con-

flicts is that the evaluator becomes the scapegoat for the animosities generated by the value conflict, especially as he attempts to negotiate these conflicts. Social action programs usually require of the evaluator a rather close and continuing association with program management. During this continuing association, the evaluator must be very careful to receive adequate objective commentary from people holding controversial points of view, such that an objective treatment of the evaluation activities can be operationalized.

There is also the problem that the evaluator, being surrounded by dedicated people actively involved in a process of change, can either act as a reactive agent hindering the change or place himself into the program as part of the program, catching himself up in the change process and setting his objectivity at a less than desirable level. Resolution of value conflicts is not absolutely essential for good evaluation of social action programs, but may be necessary in the interpretation of results which, as one can see later in other discussion, are scarcely predetermined criterion observations. Hence, the absence of either a clear role definition or of procedures or checkpoints that an evaluator can follow in dealing with value conflicts presents the evaluator with a serious concern in social action programs. This concern probably is true of other programs, but not to the dimensions that the social action-type programs usually offer.

The second concern deals with the ability of a decision maker to identify important baseline information needs at the onset of a developmental program. Social action programs generally tend to be developmental in nature in that they are seeking to right particular social injustices or to carry on social reform at a particular period in time. Associated with the development of social action programs is the basic need to develop treatments and activities aimed at the accomplishment of a set of outcomes that may be very reactive to the setting in

which they take place. Hence, social action programs tend to be uncharted trips into the unknown. Current limitations of educational measurement require the establishment of certain baseline activities prior to the collection of information upon change. Such baseline activities include pretesting, development of tests, and specification of test development and storage instruments. During the time that the evaluator of a social action program is identifying the variables which will provide information of importance to the program objectives, it is assumed that there exists certain pre-knowledge concerning what is important to be measured. Unfortunately, in most social action programs the questions that a decision maker might ask, the decisions that he might have to make and which he might have to establish are not clear nor easy to anticipate. Hence, the decision maker cannot totally identify the information needs which he may be expected to meet. The nature of social action programs (i.e., the fact that their objectives are based upon what are often value controversies) is such that support information when needed is often imperative. Absence of particular support information at times can be construed by program opponents as inexcusable and can be used to threaten program goal accomplishment. It becomes more imperative, then, for the evaluator to collect an adequate baseline of information, but the circumstances and lack of previous information on the variables involved in social action programs limit our ability to anticipate those information needs, creating a crucial situation.

The third problem is related to the reasonableness of the goals of social action programs. Too often, social action program goals posit either an unrealistic schedule of attainment or a stated set of goals that cannot be logically attained in the future. In cases where the social action programs assume goals beyond our capabilities in terms of time periods for attainment, they usually

operate under an assumption that educational activity or education as a profession has the benefit of knowledge that is currently not in existence. Hence, social action goals often assume that things like attitude measurement can occur without instrument development or that attitudes can be changed in one-day intensive settings of operations, or that proper educational activities can be prescribed immediately to remedy diagnosed educational difficulties. Unfortunately, these assumptions of greater knowledge and greater power of education ultimately result in goals far too ambitious to be accomplished by the program. Some of these goals even go beyond the route of logic, mainly because the actual problem has not really been analyzed; but instead, focus has been placed upon the injustice of the problem. A good example of this exists in Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act; Title I was directed toward the equalization of educational opportunities and focuses upon target groups of children in schools in areas where large numbers of poverty families are compacted. Educator-operationalized goals of Title I end up seeking to see if Title I students approach an equality with groups of similar age students in non-Title I schools in regard to achievement. It is quite clear here that Title I students are already learning at a less than average rate, and that the treatment of Title I is expected to increase their rate of learning up to that of the average child. It is not impossible but may be overly ambitious to expect that Title I as a program might equalize the learning rate of the disadvantaged child versus the normal child in the non-Title I school; it is, however, ridiculous to expect that such a treatment could be devised that would not only equalize the learning rate but cause the already disadvantaged Title I child to learn at a faster rate than normal. Such an assumption would have to occur if the treatment were to equalize the children's achievement status.

A fourth problem is again associated with that of goals. This problem deals

with the fact that principal outcomes of social action programs are not usually observable until the operation of the program has become history. Examples of this center around such things as changes in social studies curricula, the primary effects of which become observable only after students have left the school setting. Similar social action goals are associated with programs like New Careers, which seeks to cause a change in the characteristics of individuals fitting certain career opportunity program dimensions. However, until successful charting and practice of those programs are available and until sufficient time has passed to look at the effects of this program on the job market and on the status of certain minority groups, little can be said about the ultimate success of the career opportunities program. Instead, the evaluator is faced with measuring some short-term symptoms of what is hypothesized to be the long-term effect. Hence, the evaluation of social action programs can only be as good as we can associate the short-term symptoms with the anticipated long-term effects.

A fifth area of concern is related to the problem we have with the measurement of unanticipated, uncharted relationships. In social action programs we do not know the length of the critical time period upon which a treatment operates. In such examples as changing attitudes we do know that early measurement (i.e., measurement before the attitude has taken place, anticipating quicker treatment reactions than actually occur) tends to cause false decisions to be made relative to the effectiveness of the program and tends to be reactive with the treatment. We also know that over-application of a treatment may eventually result in just the opposite effect than that desired; to illustrate this one might consider the conduct of an information band for attitude change. If the treatment is conducted for a length of time after the attitude has been changed, a resulting change may occur in the opposite direction. On the other hand, if the treatment is not conducted long enough to acquire the attitude change in the desired direction, this

change may never occur. What we do not know is the limits of that period over which the treatment can be applied and still output the desired change. In other words, we do not know the interval over which the attitude measurement should occur. Many variables associated with social action programming have these characteristics--that they can be threatened by measurement made too early or by measurement too long delayed. Unfortunately, in many cases of social action program variables we do not know the critical period of measurement.

A sixth and last problem is our inability to analyze complex interactions often appearing in social action programs. These interactions sometimes occur as part of the nature of the variables appearing within the social action program setting and at other times occur as a result of the setting itself. In the South it can be documented that blacks as a group can be hated by a prejudiced farmer, yet that farmer feels only love and acceptance of his black farm workers. Like this seemingly paradoxical nature of prejudice, many social action variables behave with differences toward group norms and individual norms. Another interaction problem occurs because we are unable to discern the effects of a treatment rendered individually versus the effects of a treatment rendered through mass media. In this case we are again unable to trace through a multivariate maze of subject type indicators to identify the outcomes of any specific subgroup under a particular administration of the treatment. Our inability to trace systematically results of highly specific target groups renders many of our analyses inadequate to cope with the complexities of the social action programs. Our models for analysis simply do not cope with the complexity of the environment, and our previous information has not recorded for us an array of information concerning the interactions of treatment with contextual variables. Hence, given that it is known what information is wanted and that data which could produce such information can be collected does not guarantee the existence of analysis models which would

allow such information to be extracted.

In summary, six problems have been identified as seemingly peculiar, or at least unique to a point of concern, in social action programs. The author assumes that problems related to the specificity of other programs can be found through similar types of analysis and experience. Nowhere are suggestions made in this paper to satisfy some of these problems; instead, the author has brought these problems to the attention of the panel for discussion. Potentially, such concerns may lead to the development of solutions and eventually to the further development of evaluation methodology.